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The Italian Heritage in Des Moines: Photographs

Notes by Maureen McCoy and William Silag





Labor Day in Des Moines, 1908: a parade pauses for the photographer. In the background are the Three Star Hotel and the Italian Importing Company, businesses founded by immigrants from northern Italy. (SHSI, courtesy Joseph Romano)

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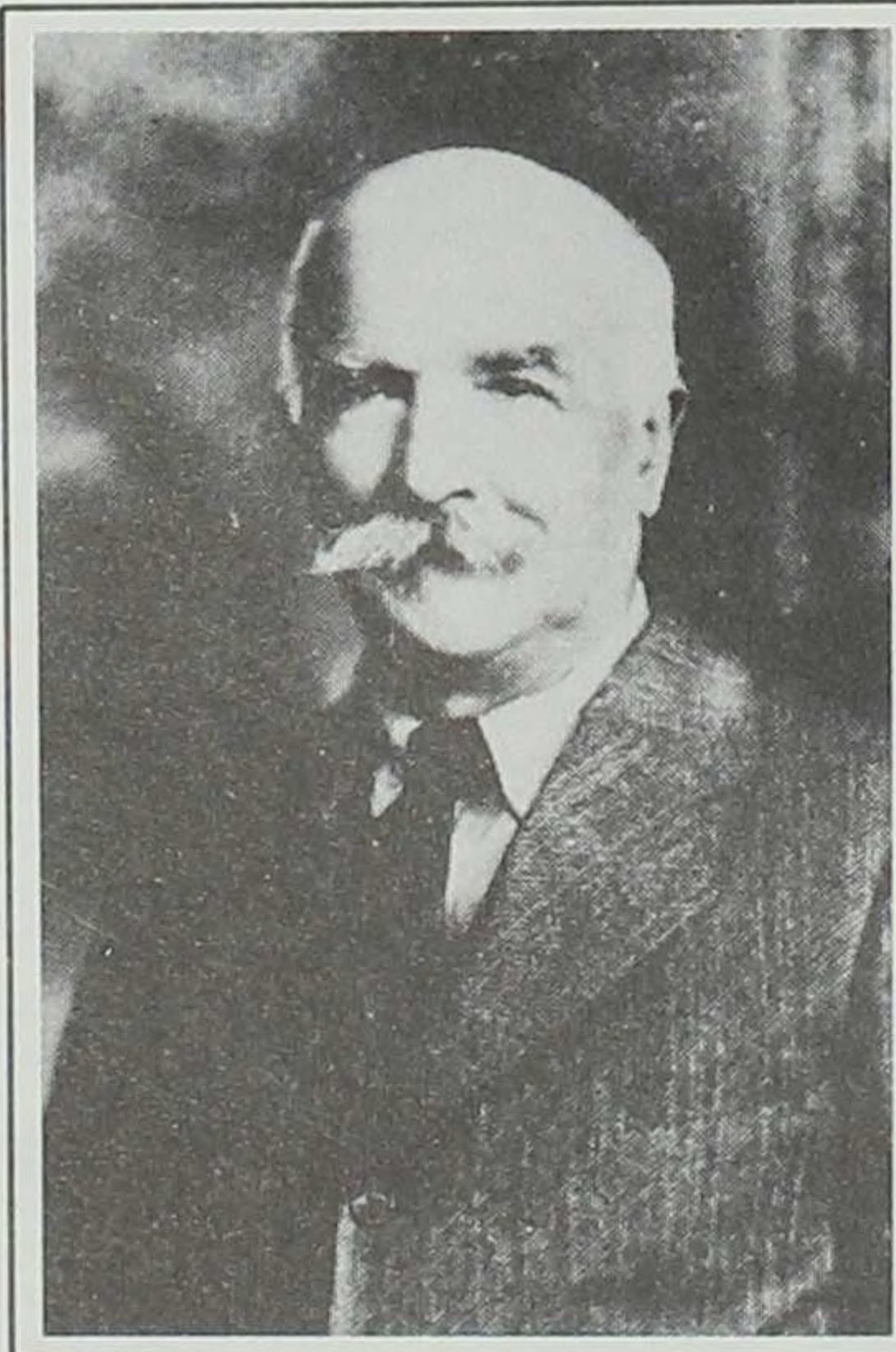
Italian Day in Des Moines, 1908: a parade pauses for the photographer. In the background are the Three Star Hotel and the Italian Importing Company, businesses founded by immigrants from northern Italy. (SHSL, courtesy Joseph Romano)

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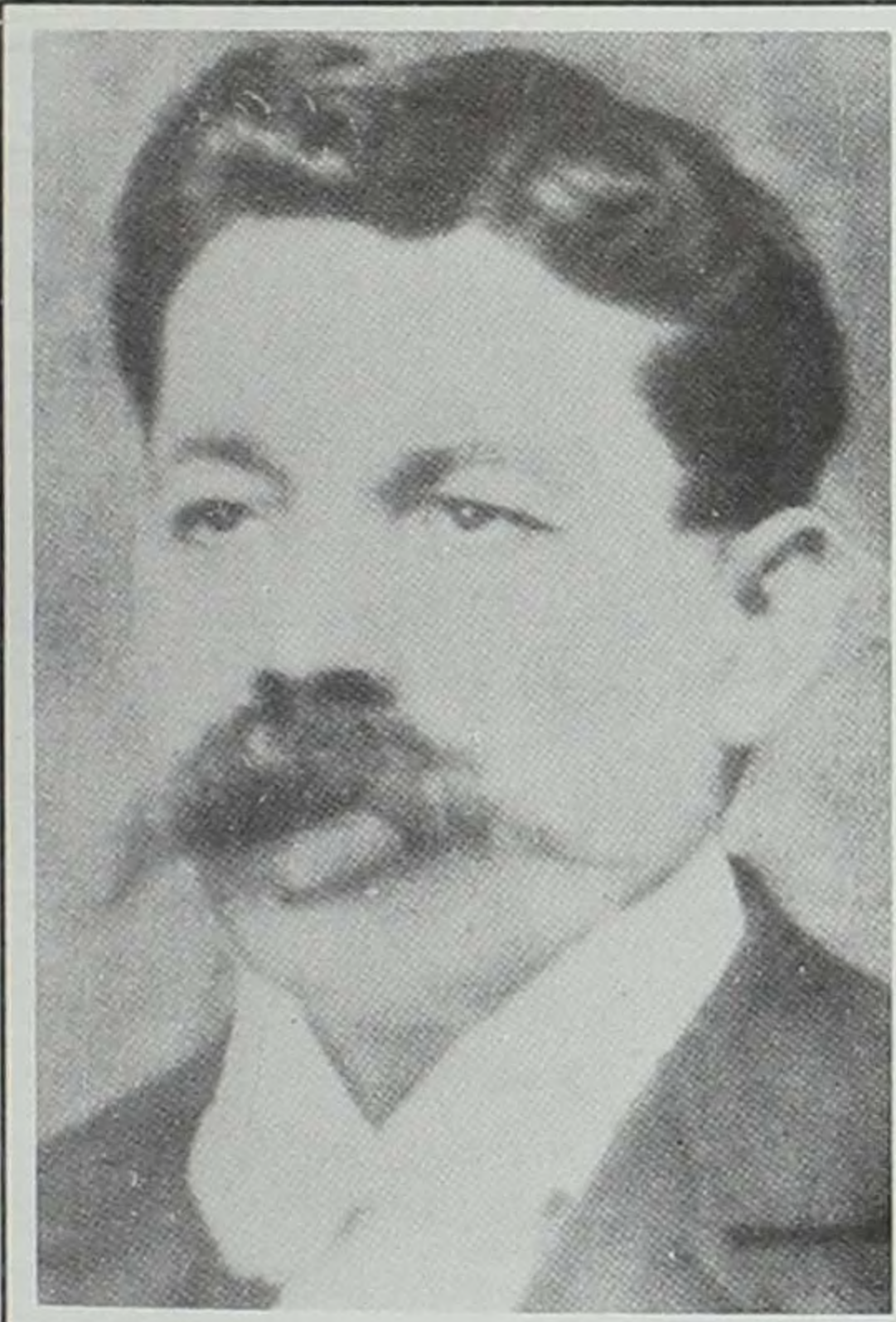
Pioneers of the Italian-American community of Des Moines: (standing, l. to r.) Antonio Napoletano, Constantino Giuliano, Luigi Jacopetti; (seated, l. to r.) Marco Chiesa, Joseph Chiesa, Frank DiBiaggio. Right, Crucoli, a village on the Ionian Sea in southern Italy, original home of such Des Moines families as the Scalises, the Gazzos, and the Sarcones. Other Des Moines families originated in Terravecchia and Cutro, also in southern Italy.

Luigi Jacopetti, one of the first Italian pioneers of the city of Des Moines.



For more than a half century, from the early 1880s through the 1930s, Italian immigrants traveled to Des Moines in search of new homes and new opportunities. Most left Italy to escape the chronic economic problems of their homeland, particularly in Italy's southern provinces where the majority of Des Moines-bound immigrants originated. Iowa's Italians experienced the same hardships and frustrations as other ethnic groups, but adapted rapidly to life in the United States. In Des Moines, the immigrants and their children enjoyed success in a variety of economic pursuits and earned positions of respect in city politics and in the local business community. They also retained a strong sense of their cultural heritage and preserved many of its values and traditions.

Published census figures do not provide precise counts of Italian-born Americans living in Des Moines at any given time, but the total number of Italian immigrants arriving in Des Moines in the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries was at least several thousand. The identities of the first Italian immigrants to settle in the city are better known, however. The earliest arrivals moved quickly to take advantage of local economic opportunities. Luigi Jacopetti came to Des Moines in 1880 and soon opened a shop at Third and Walnut to sharpen scissors and knives; he also made umbrellas and sold barber supplies. A short time later, the Buonanni family built a candy kitchen adjacent to the streetcar waiting room at Sixth and Mulberry. By the 1890s several other businesses begun by Italian immigrants could be found in the neighborhood of the railroad depot: Marco Chiesa's tobacco store at Fourth and Depot, Egidio Romano's fruit stand at Fifth and Walnut, and the Three Star Hotel and Saloon, operated by Romano and Peter D'Appolonia, on Fourth Street near the railroad depot.



Samuel Coppola, first president of *Stemma D'Italia*, founded in 1898.

The photographs on this page and the opposite page appeared in the *American Citizen* newspaper.

A charter for the *Societa Stemma d'Italia*, listing the organization's officers at the time of its founding, in 1898, and its officers in 1932.



Most of the pioneer Italian-American businessmen of the 1880s and 1890s hailed from the provinces of northern Italy—Genoa, Tuscany, Venetia, Lombardy, and the Piedmont—and had come to Des Moines only after examining opportunities in other American cities. Apparently the presence of fellow northern Italians in the coal mining communities of northern Polk County and in the counties southeast of Des Moines attracted these men to central Iowa, where they hoped to establish various retail businesses to serve their coal mining countrymen. This they did with great success, though it would be a mistake to see their commercial efforts as aimed toward the creation of an insular Italian ethnic community. Located in the central business district of Iowa's largest city, the firms started by the Chiesas, Egidio Romano, and the other enterprising immigrants who would join them participated fully in the economic life of Des Moines. These early immigrant business firms also made vital contributions to the development of the Italian-American community that emerged in the city in the early years of the twentieth century.

Of particular importance was the establishment of the Italian Importing Company, a wholesale and retail firm specializing in traditional Italian foods for the growing immigrant market. Founded in 1900 by Egidio Romano, Marco Chiesa, and several other businessmen, the Italian Importing Company operated its own truck gardens on the outskirts of Des Moines and gradually built up a trade that stretched across the entire state. The company's delivery wagons traveled regular routes to other Iowa communities, including the nearby coal mining towns in Polk County but also reaching more than one hundred miles northeast to Oelwein, where several hundred Italian immigrants worked in railroad yards, and as far west as Council Bluffs. Joseph Romano, son of one of the company's founders, remembers making deliveries as far south as northern Missouri. The Italian Importing Company offered other important services to immigrants living in Des Moines. These included real estate and job information, assistance with money exchange, and travel arrangements between Des Moines and Italy. Many Italian men who worked in Des Moines had traveled alone to America, hoping to save enough to pay for the eventual passage of their families to the United States. Such family separations could last for months or years; individual experiences varied widely. Whatever the time of separation, until the family could be reunited, many young men sent money back to Italy periodically to insure the well-being of their families. In this, and in the purchase of tickets and the

filing of sponsorship papers, the Italian Importing Company acted as a source of assistance and information throughout the early period of Italian settlement in Des Moines.

Increasingly after 1900 the immigrants served by such business firms tended to be men and women recently arrived in the United States from southern Italy. Though important cultural differences existed between northern and southern Italians—most of them related to the divergent economic histories of the agrarian southern provinces and the urban, industrial provinces of the north—in Des Moines regional differences proved largely insignificant. All evidence suggests that immigrants from southern Italy enjoyed economic success on a par with that of the earlier arrivals from northern Italy and that relationships between members of the two groups have been cordial and conducive to the development of a strengthened Italian-American identity.

Where coal mining had offered employment to the majority of northern Italian immigrants, railroads proved more important as a source of jobs for men from southern Italy. This is not surprising, for many had worked on railroads in Italy before they emigrated and there is circumstantial evidence that a massive strike that crippled Italy's railroad system in the late 1890s may have prompted many transportation workers to leave the southern provinces at the turn of the century. In any event, the immigrants from southern Italy had definite ideas

Below, Egidio Romano's first Des Moines business firm: the fruit stand at Fifth and Walnut. Right, Joseph Muto's produce counter at the City Market in the early 1900s. Both Romano and Muto successfully expanded their businesses, serving customers in the Italian-American community and in the general Des Moines market as well. Bottom right, looking north on Sixth Street in downtown Des Moines, at the future site of the City Market.

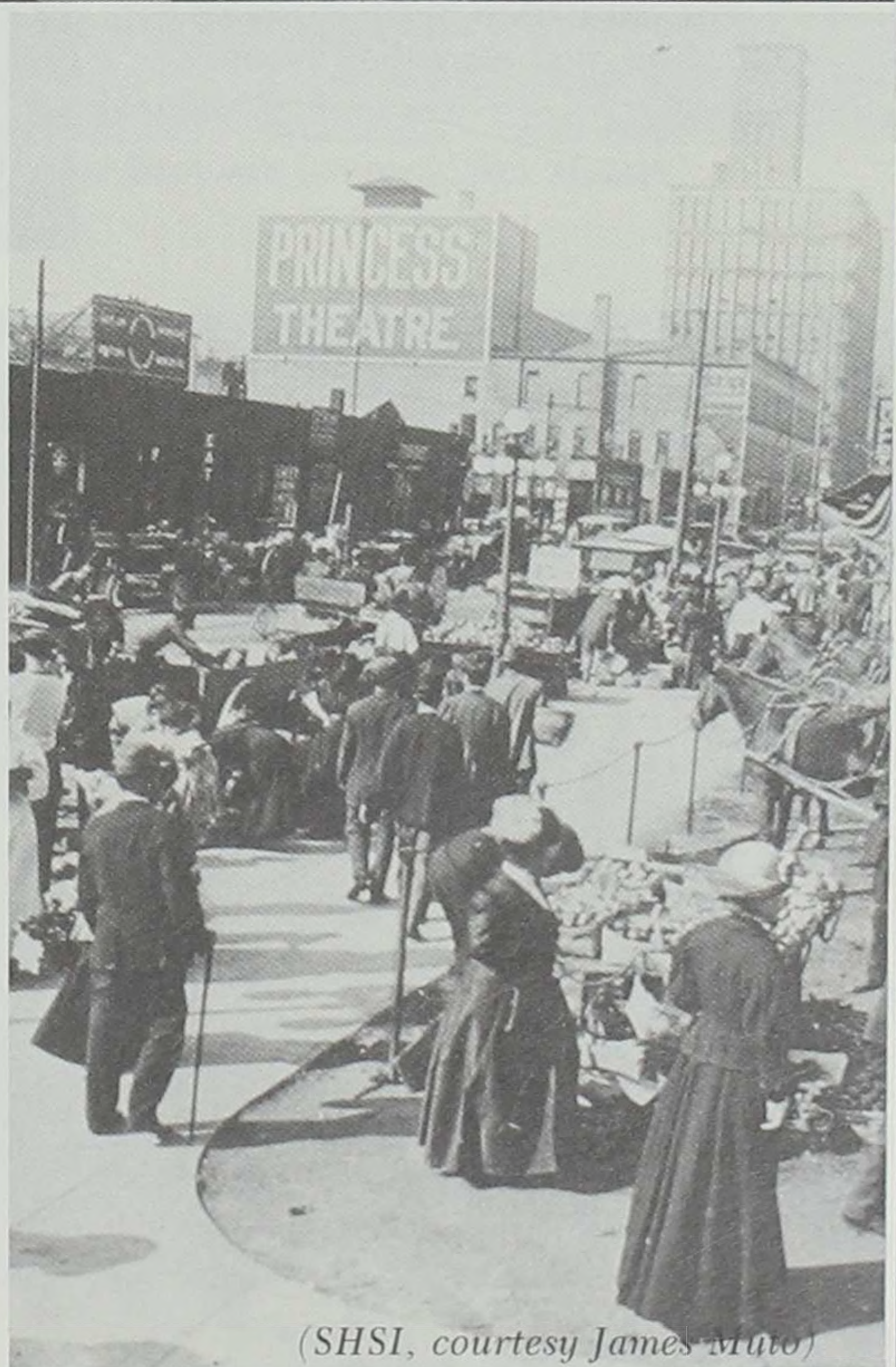
(SHSI, courtesy James Muto)





(SHSI, courtesy James Muto)

about their ultimate destination even before they left their homeland. Unlike the northern Italian immigrants of the 1880s and 1890s, the men from the South—often with the help of the Italian Importing Company or another firm functioning as travel agent—arranged for direct passage from Italy to Des Moines; they did not stop in other American cities along the way. Some immigrants received assistance from *padrones*, Italian-born organizers of labor crews who contracted with American employers to provide workers for construction projects. The padrone system was quite important during the 1890s and 1900s, and several present-day residents of Des Moines mentioned having relatives whose passage to the United States was arranged in this way. The padrone's contract with employers usually specified the length of service—often the period of a construction project—after which immigrant workers looked for job opportunities on their own. With or without initial association with padrones, Italian-born men in Des Moines after 1900 found work in the city's brick and tile yards, its railroad shops and woolen mills, or its retail businesses. Frequently individual immigrants parlayed modest amounts of capital into thriving tailoring or shoe repair businesses, barber shops, or grocery stores. Joseph Muto, for example, began with a produce counter in the City Market in the years before World War I. Later, however, he operated a succession of successful retail grocery businesses on Des Moines' south side.



(SHSI, courtesy James Muto)



(SHSI, courtesy St. Anthony's Church, Des Moines)

St. Anthony's Church and Rectory and, in the foreground, the Southside Community Center formed the core of the Italian-American neighborhood that developed on the south side after 1900. The original church was built in 1906 and was replaced by the present structure in the 1930s. The Community Center building, brought to the site from Ft. Des Moines after the First World War, provided classroom space, lounges, showers, and recreation rooms.

Two south side groceries: the Graziano Brothers store on South Union continues to thrive in 1983. Farther along South Union, the DeSio Grocery prospered for many years but closed in 1975. Benny DeSio, pictured here with his father in the 1920s, is now retired.



(SHSI, courtesy Rosa and Benny DeSio)



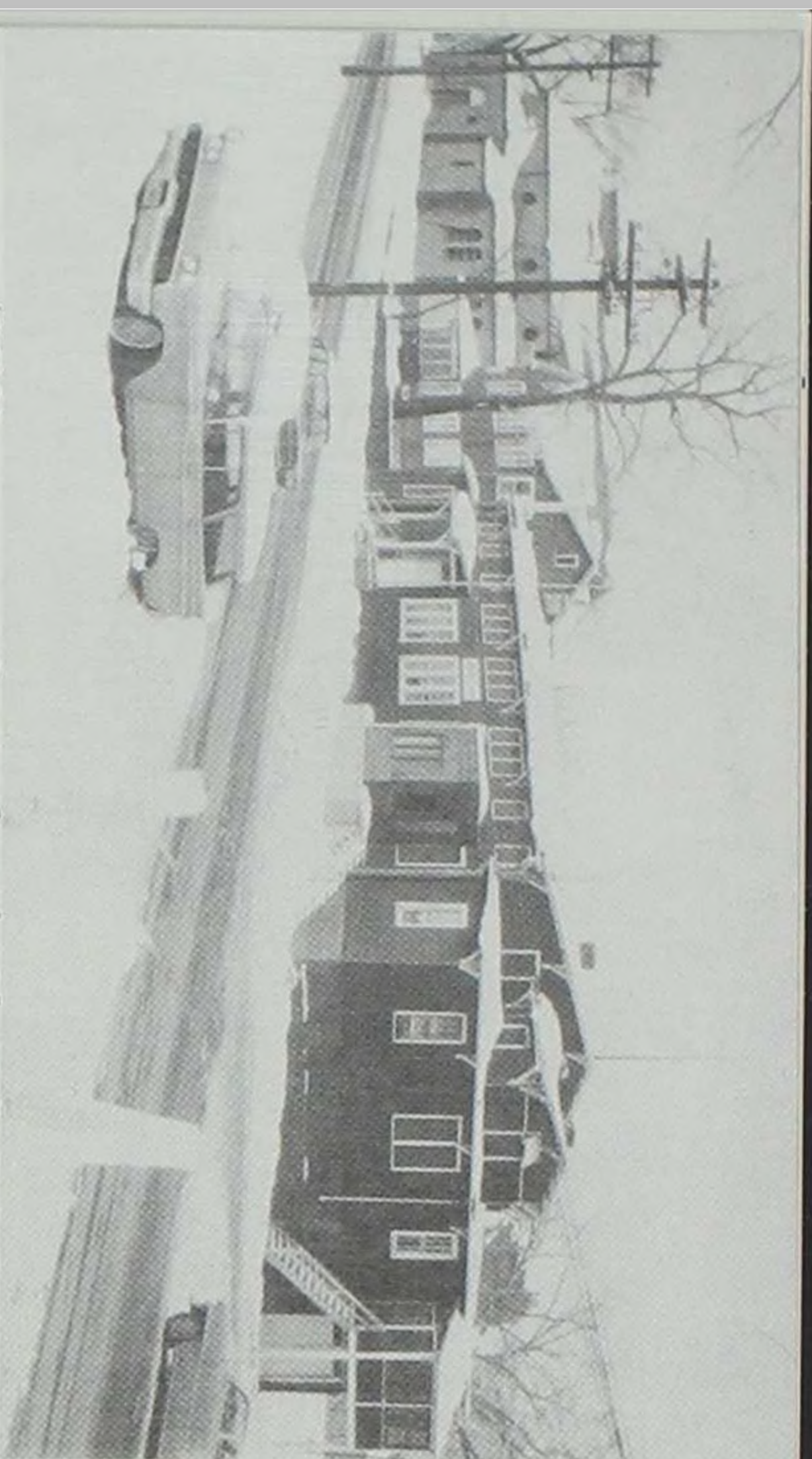


(SHSI, courtesy Graziano Brothers Grocery, Des Moines)

(SHSI, courtesy James Muto)

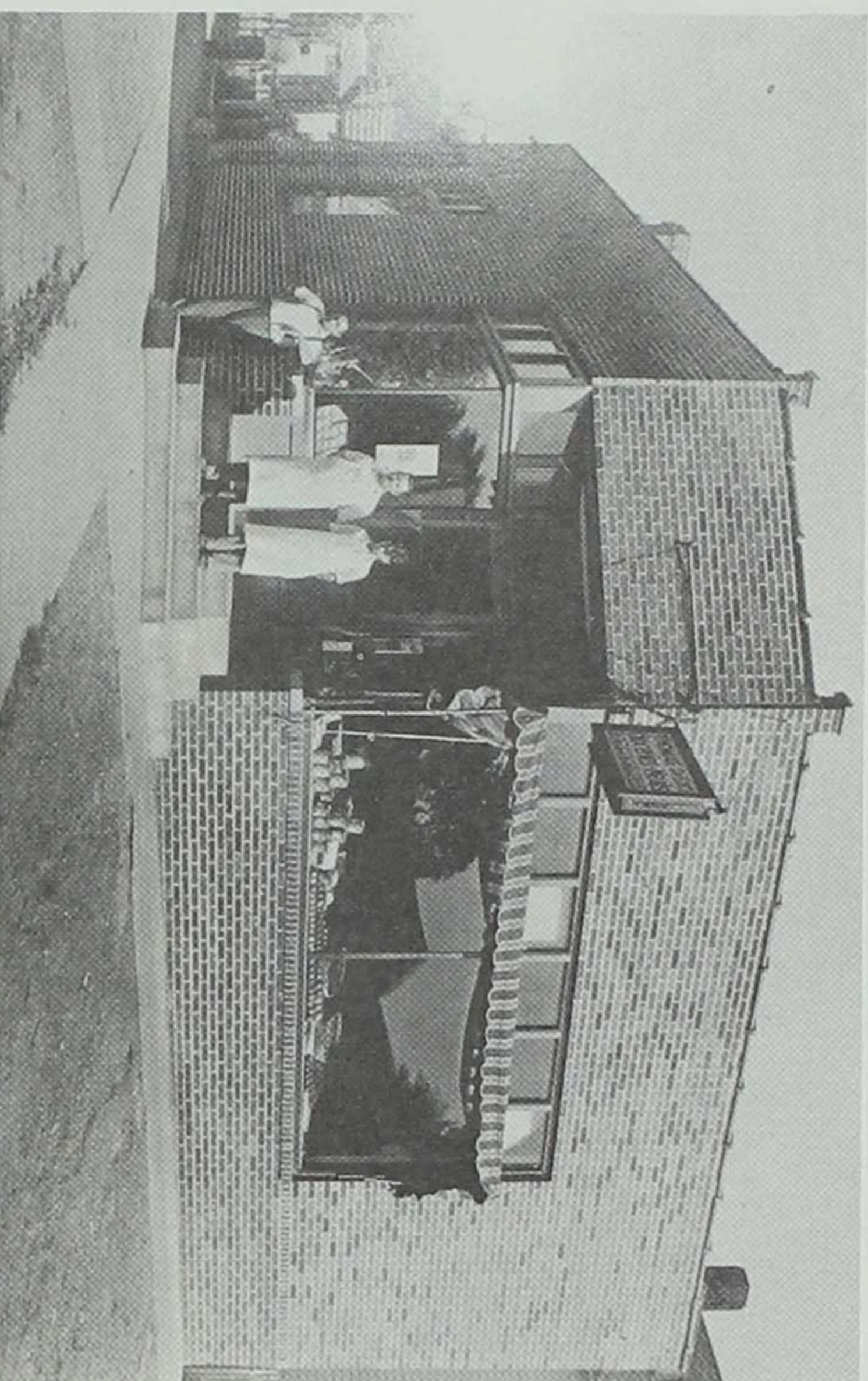


A 1936 meeting of the Societa Stemma d'Italia. This organization was formed in 1898 as an immigrant aid and fraternal society, and it has provided important leadership for the Italian-American community since that time.



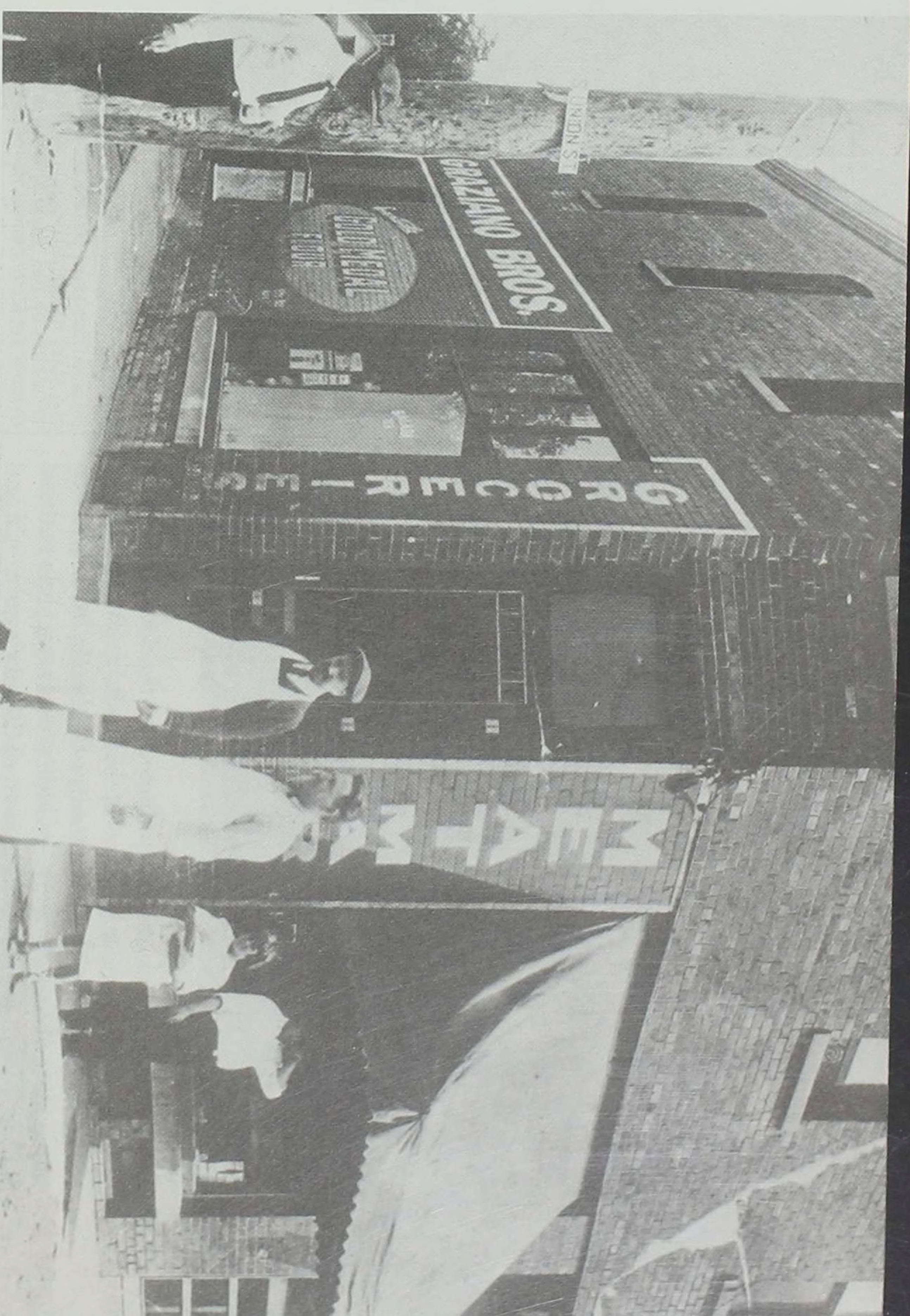
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St. Anthony's Church and Rectory and, in the foreground, the South-side Community Center formed the core of the Italian-American neighborhood that developed on the south side after 1900. The original church was built in 1906 and was replaced by the present structure in the 1930s. The Community Center building, brought to the site from Ft. Des Moines after the First World War, provided classroom space, lounges, showers, and recreation rooms.



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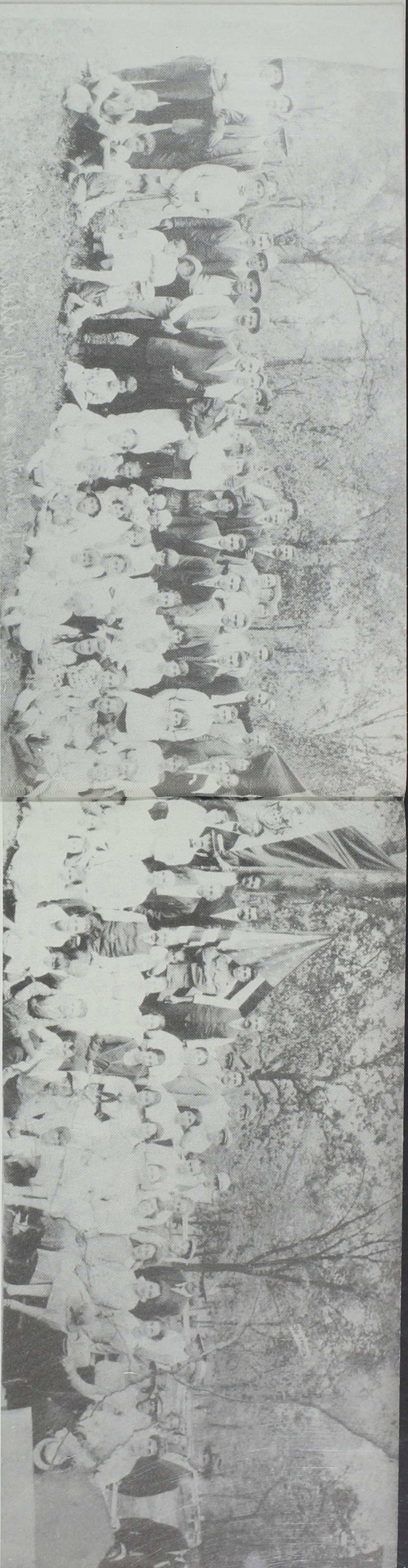
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A 1936 meeting of the Società Stemma d'Italia. This organization was formed in 1898 as an immigrant aid and fraternal society, and it has provided important leadership for the Italian-American community since that time.



(SHSL, courtesy John Chiesa)

mercial dimension.

The growth of the Italian-American community on Des Moines' south side has been sustained by the activities of three key cultural institutions: the church, the benevolent societies, and the *American Citizen* newspaper. St. Anthony's Roman Catholic Church, completed in 1906 at the corner of Ninth and Indianola, now includes 1,500 families and has remained a center of community social activity. In 1912 classrooms were added and in 1920 the Southside Community Center opened next door to the church and school. The benevolent societies — Stemma D'Italia, the Garibaldi Club, and Vittoria Lodge — have represented the interests of their members and have provided leadership to the Italian-American community as a whole. This is true also of the *American Citizen*, which began publication in 1919 as *Il Risveglio* ("reawakening") and continued until 1972. Founded by Anthony Sarcone, Frank Bianco, and Ray Simonini as a community newspaper, the *American Citizen* gave voice to the aspirations of Des Moines' Italian immigrants and their children. Institutions such as these served a dual purpose: they helped Italian-Americans retain a sense of their cultural heritage while encouraging members of the community to take full advantage of the economic, political, and educational opportunities offered in the city of Des Moines.

The photographs presented here offer a glimpse of some of the pioneers of the Italian-American community that have contributed much to the cultural vitality of Des Moines over the past one hundred years.

Family grocery businesses conducted by the Desios and the Grazianos have similar histories of successful growth in service to the Italian-American community. By the 1920s, the Italian immigrants of Des Moines—including northern and southern Italians—were represented in most of the city's industrial and commercial trades and could be found in the ranks of the professions as well. Of special importance in the early years was the presence of three young Italian immigrants—Nicola Bellizzi, George Scarpino, and Natalie Morasco—on the Des Moines police force, symbolizing the city's acceptance of its newest immigrant group.

The early 1900s saw the beginning of a residential shift for Italian immigrant families in Des Moines, out of the congested area near the railroad depot and across the Raccoon River to a pleasant, hilly neighborhood on the city's south side. The move was prompted primarily by a desire for residential quarters better than the crowded second- and third-floor apartments in which most families had been living, together with a level of prosperity that permitted families to consider larger homes for themselves. The Joseph Chiesa family moved into a new house on the south side as early as 1901; Peter D'Appolonia's family built a house next door at about the same time. In 1906 Joseph Muto moved his produce business from the City Market to the south side, where it developed into a complete retail grocery. Later other grocers, including Thomas Desio and the Graziano brothers, also opened stores on the south side of the city. These family businesses, and the shops and restaurants that followed, gave the neighborhood an important com-

PHOTOGRAPHS APPEARING IN THIS ARTICLE WERE COPIED FROM ORIGINALS LOANED TO THE STATE HISTORICAL SOCIETY OF IOWA BY RESIDENTS OF DES MOINES WHO PARTICIPATED IN A PUBLIC PROGRAM, FUNDED BY THE IOWA HUMANITIES BOARD AND SPONSORED BY THE SOCIETY, IN WHICH IOWANS WERE ASKED TO EXPLORE THEIR ETHNIC HERITAGE AND TO SHARE IDEAS ABOUT THE INFLUENCE OF THAT HERITAGE ON THEMSELVES AND ON THEIR COMMUNITY. PROJECT DIRECTOR LOREN N. HORTON AND THE AUTHORS WISH TO THANK MANY INDIVIDUALS AND INSTITUTIONS IN DES MOINES AND IN IOWA CITY FOR THEIR ADVICE AND ASSISTANCE, INCLUDING MAYOR PETE CRIVARO, JAMES MUTO, PATRICIA CIVITATE, BABE RISIGNANO, DOMINIC RIZZUTTI, MRS. ROSA DESIO AND BENNY DESIO, PROFESSOR JOSEPH LACAVA, JOSEPH ROMANO, JANE NORMAN, ELAINE ESTES, FATHER GEORGE NODANIEL, JAMES SARCONE, LEO SARCONE, AND GASPARE SARCONE, MANDO TONINI, CHARLES LAVORATO, JOHN CHIESA, DOMINIC BONANNO, MRS. RAY SIMONINI, DONATO CIANCARUSO, JOHN AND MARY SITRONETO, AND FATHER GERALD RYAN. BELLIZZI-MACRAE AMERICAN LEGION POST, ST. ANTHONY'S CHURCH, GRAZIANO BROTHERS GROCERY, WHO-TV, AND THE DES MOINES TRIBUNE GENEROUSLY PROVIDED SPACE AND OTHER FACILITIES. THE AUTHORS ALSO WISH TO THANK PHOTOGRAPHERS STEVEN J. FULLER AND GERALD MANSHEIM, PROFESSOR LINDA KERBER, AND THOMAS HARTIG, MAILE SAGEN, AND CEDRA WILLIAMSON OF THE IOWA HUMANITIES BOARD STAFF FOR THEIR ASSISTANCE.

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The Garibaldi Club's annual meeting of 1912, pictured below, included Luigi Jacopetti, wearing a white suit and seated two rows in front of the flagpole.



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(SHSI, courtesy Leo Sarcone)



The founders of the American Citizen newspaper: (l. to r.) Ray Simonini, Anthony Sarcone, Frank Bianco. The weekly newspaper served as the information source for Italian Des Moines news from 1919 until 1972, when publication ceased. The paper sought to help immigrants adjust to American customs and laws and to provide a communications link within the Des Moines Italian-American community.

CONTRIBUTORS

DORRIS BROWNLEE MARTIN grew up in Waterloo, Iowa, where she graduated second in her high school class. While a student at the University of Iowa she met Thomas Ellsworth Martin whom she married in 1920, after the end of the First World War. In 1938 Tom Martin was elected to the U.S. House of Representatives where he served until his election as U.S. Senator for the state of Iowa. In 1961, after twenty-two years of service in the House and Senate, Senator and Mrs. Martin retired to their new home on Lake Washington in Seattle.

WILLIAM SILAG is currently a member of the history department faculty at Iowa State University. He received his Ph.D. in history at the University of Iowa in 1979. Silag served as editor of the *Palimpsest* from 1979 to 1982, and directed the State Historical Society's publications program. During the spring and summer of 1982 Silag served as one of the humanist scholars for the Iowa Humanities Board grant project studying the Italian-American community in Des Moines, Iowa.

STEPHEN D. REGAN, raised in Waukon and now serving as a consultant for Keystone Area Education Agency, is a former history teacher who became interested in the USS *Iowa* while serving in the U.S. Navy. He received a B.A. in history from Upper Iowa University, an M.S. from Winona State University, and a doctorate in educational psychology from the University of South Dakota. He lives in Elkader.

MAUREEN MCCOY is a native of Des Moines. She holds a Bachelor of Arts degree in English from the University of Denver, and she is currently a student in the Iowa Writers' Workshop at the University of Iowa, where she is working on a Master of Fine Arts degree in fiction. Maureen has served as an editorial assistant in the publications program area of the State Historical Society. Most recently, she served as the humanist-in-residence for the Iowa Humanities Board grant project studying the Italian-American community in Des Moines, Iowa.